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Letter from an Unknown Woman and the Melancholia of Philosophy: Cavell, Austin, Derrida

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My text analyzes the agency of melancholia and melodrama in the philosophy of Stanley Cavell, where they labor as a *sinthome* of what in philosophy is memory. This analysis hinges on a close reading of Stefan Zweig's *Letter from an Unknown Woman* as a point of access to articulating these concerns, as Cavell's own writing on the subject (in *Contesting Tears*) hinges on a close reading of Max Ophüls's film based on Zweig's novella, but only after Cavell has explicitly excluded Zweig from his argument. Moving from this exclusion to Cavell's philosophizing of birthplace via Austin and Derrida (in *Philosophical Passages*), I propose a deconstruction of that position in inheriting and remembering philosophy today, even where it invokes the problem of technics, which still depends on an identitarian politics.

My writing here – writing, say, about melodrama and melancholia in Stanley Cavell, where melodrama and melancholia work as programming figures of film, philosophy and psychoanalysis – branches out from the start into a conversation with various little phantoms, or ghosts.

This in itself is somewhat melancholy, where the very emergence of my voice seems to depend on my first acknowledging this *séance*, because ghosts constitute writing, or rather my writing now: what English as Cavell's language describes as writing translates in my mother tongue as *pismo*, denoting before all missives and letters, and letter is a discourse where the act and the effect of writing are generically defined by a ghost of "you," the ghost of the reader.





Then again, all writing seems defined by a ghost of “you,” the ghost of its reader – what is more, by the very ghostliness of this “you.” True; in which case my writing, at that point where in my tongue it cannot but also come out as a letter, seems defined by the emergence of this ghost, by that labor of the ghostly where the ghostly itself, or the ghostly yourself, cannot but materialize. As a result, my writing always already scandalizes what in ghosts is reducible to promise and potentiality; or, put differently, my writing (to the extent to which it still lingers within its mother tongue) always already promises to scandalize. In turn, Cavell’s language traces this promise to scandalize in what English, in its own right, describes as a letter: because letter in English is a missive, but also a mark, in writing, of spoken sounds, and therefore always also a mark of inscription. Letter in English is therefore always also a material event of the cipher. Further, in that it entails the cipher as a mark of inscription, letter is always also a naught, an empty site where this material event takes place (as it were), and is therefore always also a “spectral supplement.”¹

So perhaps my writing cannot but turn and branch out this way, specifically if I want to address melodrama and melancholia in Cavell, as Cavell’s own “you” calls for a letter or is perhaps provoked by one, precisely where letters trace the scope of spectrality (of conversation). That is important already insofar as conversation is one of the focal concepts of Cavell’s philosophy, identified often as the scene of instruction of philosophy. So: what position opens in Cavell if letters trace the scope of the spectral of *conversation*, given that Cavell’s own writing on melodrama and melancholia hinges on a *letter*, in this case *Letter from an Unknown Woman*, a 1948 film by Max Ophüls? Ophüls’s melodrama, that is, specters forth as it were the founding argument of Cavell’s *Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman* – that the creation of film, with the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman as a film’s synecdoche in this sense, “was as if meant for philosophy – meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression” [1996: vii, xii].

¹ Etymologically too cipher is both a sign and a vacant place where sign forms: it derives from “sifr” in Arabic, denoting both zero and a cipher. A cipher is therefore, says J. Hillis Miller, “a placeholder in a vacant place, but it is also any number from one to infinity” [2004: 124]. Also, as zero, “it seems to perform as a spectral supplement at the phantom origin of the ‘n+1,’ generating a seriality that then compels spacing or time effects” [Cohen 2005: 84]. In turn, etymology itself could be said to work as a cipher, a kind of linguistic n+1: insofar as etymology historicizes lost traces of a linguistic past and hence what is void and forgotten in origins, tracing at the same time the very limits of the forgettable in language [see Jukić 2006: 87].





In other words, in Cavell too *Letter* works foundationally, as it works so for philosophy. Also: in Cavell too this foundation seems effected by the spectral there where spectrality technologizes film and what in film is provocative and conjurable. And finally, it is in this structural spectrality that Cavell's *Letter* too works in turn, now as a ghostly trace both towards and away from "Brief einer Unbekannten," a 1922 novella by Stefan Zweig. This trace is at its most ghostly perhaps at that point when Cavell explicitly excludes Zweig's "Brief" from his reading of (Ophüls's, film's) *Letter*. Zweig is a figure of exclusion all along, but does emerge, like that "you" of my writing, at the very end of the Ophüls analysis, when Cavell says that Henry James's "The Beast in the Jungle" "better measures Ophüls's film than the story of Stefan Zweig's from which its screenplay was, excellently, adapted" [1996: 113]: as if Zweig, here and on film, measures in fact the ghostly scope of the unknown woman, emerging now in his unknownness only to haunt film and its (psycho)analysis.

Just as it is here that my writing is again haunted by my mother tongue, where it is unknown to English: when I first wrote this in Croatian, "its" of "film and its (psycho)analysis" came out as "his," because film in Croatian is masculine, like Cavell, while (psycho)analysis, philosophy and literature labor as feminine nouns. That is why at that point I could not but speak about film and *his* (psycho)analysis: not, or not only, to point to a transference where my writing was then generated – where its very syntax yielded a coming together of film and Cavell – but, also, to steal a look at a ghostly "her" [of (psycho)analysis? philosophy? literature?] where "she" seemed to remain a figure of pro-grammatical agency, a symptom of what in countersignature is always only potentiality. (Not incidentally, it is only now that I realize that my own voice, here, labors as a voice of the unknown woman not where in English my mother tongue is unknown, conjurable or even forgotten, but where in my writing my mother tongue is forgettable.)

That is also why Cavell's woman is not a symptom as much as a *sinthome*, precisely where the spectral works as a foundational trauma of film, psychoanalysis and philosophy. And that is why it makes sense to write about Zweig's unknown woman before analyzing how, in Cavell too, she labors as a ghost. I am not saying this in order to reaffirm a metaphysics of origins and anteriority, using Zweig so as to contest Cavell. I could hardly do that, now that I have only just cast Zweig, in both film and Cavell, as commensurate to the spectral figure of the unknown woman haunting both film and its (psycho)analysis. Quite the contrary: I am saying this in an effort to inherit from Cavell that position which provokes me to produce a letter from an unknown woman precisely where Cavell deconstructs the metaphysics of origins and inheritance.





Branching into Zweig

In Zweig's novella, the unknown woman is a ghost of the past appearing as the narrative voice of an unsigned letter that a novelist, identified only as R., receives on his birthday. R. frames her epistolary narrative as a figure of Zweig's narrative consciousness (or focalization). Inside the letter, however, the unknown woman with her *Ich-Erzählung* labors as a clinical case of melancholia: unknown and nameless, she iterates that the letter will have been sent only if and after she died – in other words, that she will materialize to R. only as a ghost, suggesting at the same time that the spectral is reducible to voice, or, more dangerously still, that voice labors as a figure of voiding. Still, in order to die and start laboring as the voice that here cannot but emerge as the voice of a ghost, she first needs to go through the melancholic labors of a woman who wants to die, or else of a woman who lives only where she evacuates genealogy.

The event to define Zweig's unknown woman as a figure where genealogy is evacuated (also the moment when she emerges into the discourse of her letter; also the final event of her life history) is the death of the son she conceived with R. – the son who is as unknown to R. as is the child's mother. This son, says the woman, was the only remaining promise of her future with R., because *her* life was from the start merely a series of betrayed such promises. She says that she met R. when she herself was dying as a child to be born as a woman. Over the next fifteen years they met repeatedly and spent two nights together; even so, he always forgot her, to meet her again, and repeatedly, as an unknown woman, whom he would forget. What constitutes the scandal of her life, therefore, is less the betrayal of the promise of the future than the iteration and the repeated unforgetting of both the promise and its betrayal. As she never existed outside an iterative reduction of such promises to scandalous betrayal, *die Unbekannte* works solely as the iteration of betrayed futures, or else as melancholia. Implying, however, that melancholia is not so much about pathologizing the past or betraying the promise of a future, as about registering what cannot be worked through in the time of iteration. Also: the pathology of iteration would correspond here to what in Freud constitutes hypomnesia, or else to the failure of anamnesis (or maybe to that position where hypomnemata require in fact the failure of the anamnestic). Zweig's novella, in other words, provides a position for a critical reading of Freud's own study of melancholia, not least where *der bekannte Romanschriftsteller* Zweig exchanged himself *letters* with Freud, thus maintaining a *correspondence* with the seat of psychoanalytic knowledge.

It is as symptomatic that *die Unbekannte* dies after her son has died, as if her failure to keep what in her son was a lasting promise of unforgetting (of R.) revoked or at least occluded what in her was the very agency of promising, i.e.





of potentiality and spectrality, i.e. of programming, of what in *die Unbekannte* is always only technology. Still, her failure to keep a lasting promise of unforgetting seems vital for the novella, since it exposes this failure as in fact fundamental for the technology of promising: not only because promises are defined (de-defined?) by the allochronic futures they cast or forecast, but also because this kind of allochrony warps what she or R. know or can know as future, or as chronology. That perhaps is where Zweig's novella originates. Of course, this is not to suggest that *die Unbekannte's* letter, or *Brief*, is commensurate to her son, as if her son is in a way replaced by the letter, as both seem to be figures where R. is unforbidden. Rather than that, it is only when *die Unbekannte* realizes (knows, that is) that the promise of unforgetting is premised on what is spectral, not historical, in the technologies of becoming (technology of promising included) that she cannot but further unknow herself into a ghost, emerging now as a post-mortem voice of *die Unbekannte* – as if the logic of unknownness technologizes the agency of promising, or birth, or unforgetting.

That is also why Zweig's novella corresponds to the script of the Ophüls film precisely where the script was to reduce the narrative scandal in Zweig. In Zweig, after giving birth to her son with R., the unknown woman becomes a prostitute, refusing to marry. In Ophüls, she marries another man. Both the cinematic marriage and the novella's negation of marriage thus testify ultimately to what in promising is unsuccessful, and fundamentally so – as if promise can hardly promise anything but its own failure, as if failure is the only thing that promise can effectively promise – as if promise promises only its violability. Which means that promise as such is fundamentally melancholy. And it is precisely here that Cavell's interest in unknownness corresponds to the premises of Freud's psychoanalysis: because Freud, in his "Trauer und Melancholie," describes melancholia as the kind of disorder where psychoanalysis cannot do much, and therefore as the kind of disorder which challenges both the effect and the *knowledge* of psychoanalysis. Also, it is here, in this realization, that the unknown woman's melancholia gets unparalyzed to an extent, and produces a narrative stir towards or as melodrama, exposing melodrama in turn as a flawed therapy for unforgetting (of melancholia). As if unforgetting implicit in melancholia could not be articulated except as an analysis of what in narration is flawed, with melodrama generically organized around this flaw of unparalysis.

At this point it seems only logical to proceed with what in my argument should evolve as the narrative unparalysis of melodrama. Even so, I would not want to discount an intuition which still keeps me close to narrative *flaws*. In other words, I am still drawn to what is somewhat paralyzing in my own writing, in the position where iteration stands to be deconstructed, or disinherited perhaps, as mnemotechnology.





Die Unbekannte's melancholia, that is, is entailed in R.'s iteration of forgetting, because she not only refuses to forget the man who forgets her, but is explicitly reducing her life to the act of unforgetting the agent of forgetting her. She explicitly describes herself as a dead woman recounting here her life that from first to last belonged to him.² What is more, or less, this very assumption is beyond language, and similes cannot but fall short of reach, because R. to her was *all*, her *entire* life.³ This reduction is somewhat necessary to produce the unknown woman, because it implies the unforgetting of her birth as a woman.⁴ If that is so – and Zweig's narrator says it is – melancholia figures not merely as a forgotten unknown woman who cannot forget, but as woman as such. In other words, woman could be defined, generically, as the unforgetting unknown woman. Implied further in this definition (de-finition?) is the woman's inability to forget the act or the moment of her own birth. Woman, that is, cannot forget the act or the moment when born that way. Because of this unforgetting, birth to woman is not a beginning (because beginnings, to be beginnings, demand a radical oblivion of whatever precedes them, to then become guarantors of origin), but a *sinthome*, where *sinthome* indicates technology as the program of becoming, or else that pro-grammatical position where different pasts, presents and futures stand to be produced. I could almost say that woman is born that way to be able to give birth herself. I could evoke here another gynogenetic, or generic, film important to Cavell: George Cukor's *Adam's Rib*. Woman, that is, is created not out of the metaphysical Word of God, but out of a rib; what is at stake

² "...[S]o weißt Du, daß hier eine Tote Dir ihr Leben erzählt, ihr Leben, das das Deine war von ihrer ersten bis zu ihrer letzten wachen Stunde" [Zweig 1970: 127]. The very phrase involving the "waking hour" is a symptom here of the specific configuration of the time it takes for melancholia to negotiate its passage to the narrative of melodrama.

³ "Du warst mir – wie soll ich es sagen? Jeder einzelne Vergleich ist zu gering – Du warst *eben alles*, mein *ganzes* Leben. *Alles* existierte *nur* insofern, als es Bezug hatte auf Dich, *alles* in meiner Existenz hatte *nur* Sinn, wenn es mit Dir verbunden war. Du verwandeltest mein *ganzes* Leben" [Zweig 1970: 133; emphasis mine]. I would not want to resist here another intuition of what is yet to evolve, as an argument: insofar as R. changes *everything* for *die Unbekannte*, to the extent that no simile can articulate this effect, he does to *die Unbekannte* what film in Cavell's view does to philosophy.

⁴ "Du weißt es gewiß nicht mehr, mein Geliebter, ich aber, oh, ich erinnere mich leidenschaftlich an jede Einzelheit, ich weiß noch wie heute den Tag, nein, die Stunde, da ich zum erstenmal von Dir hörte, Dich zum erstenmal sah, und wie sollte ichs auch nicht, denn damals begann ja die Welt für mich" [1970: 127-8]. And then, soon after, when recounting the first time R. glanced at her, "in dieser einen Sekunde war die Frau in mir, der Halbwüchsigen, erwacht und war diese Frau Dir für immer verfallen" [1970: 132].





here is an unforgotten birth out of a part that the first, life-giving being forgets or at least finds forgettable. This life is not created but is given, as life reducible to a technology of life-production (of pro-creation?).⁵ After all, that is the legacy of the rib's etymology, where etymology historicizes lost traces of the linguistic past and hence what is void and forgotten in origins, tracing at the same time the very limits of the forgettable in language: Eve in Hebrew is both life and rib, and the name of the just created unknown woman. Eve's life, in other words, is pro-grammatical; what Eve names is not life but what life is reaching for as its (mnemo)technology.

I could therefore say I guess that the discourse of Zweig's unknown woman makes sense precisely as reducible to melancholia (a symptom here which works also as a *sinthome*, where she is pro-grammatical): she cannot but constantly be repeating what she is saying, as the position from which she speaks is all about the unforgetting of the forgettable. Her language is fundamentally redundant, and remains redundant until, from within this redundancy, it yields a platform for a kind of stuttering, for a massive alliteration perhaps, a certain rustle of language in which insights into its grammatical structure give way to intuiting language where it is pro-grammatical, a pro-grammatical machine perhaps.⁶ That, among other things, is why Zweig's *Romanschriftsteller R.*, at the end of the novella, cannot visualize her, but senses being haunted by her as if she were "distant music" [1970: 163]. This is the moment when *die Unbekannte* deconstructs the very conceptual limits of narrative consciousness or of focalization. Zweig's focalizer (identified only as R., or else as *der bekannte Romanschriftsteller*)⁷ emerges

⁵ After all, the first-created, rib-giving being in Genesis is unable to recall the secret of its creation; this inability seems constituent to it, as a necessary precondition of or to its metaphysics. By the same measure, Zweig's R. forgets his birthday; the unknown woman never forgets it – she marks it, almost ritually, as the birthday of the agent of her own self – every year she sends him white roses, to remind him that birthdays should not be forgotten.

⁶ *Die Unbekannte* invokes here what Gilles Deleuze says about stuttering in his *Critique and clinique*, specifically when commenting on the discourse of Sacher Masoch's fiction, and the makeup of its masochism. Zweig's novella corresponds then both to Deleuze's valuation of Austrian-Hungarian politics and culture (where they entail the revolutionary), and to his concept of *devenir-femme* (where becoming woman too entails the revolutionary).

⁷ It is almost as if Zweig identifies R. first, or only, as a spectral supplement of voice at the origin of writing, be it the voice of the letter of *die Unbekannte* or the voice of his own self, where Zweig himself is *der bekannte Romanschriftsteller*. In Zweig, R. emerges only as «der bekannte Romanschriftsteller R.» [1970: 125] and is as such reducible to a spectral supplement of the initial, capitalized cipher in *Romanschriftsteller*. In other





as but a perforated narrative casing for *die Unbekannte's* letter. It is evident that she knows him better than he knows himself – evident especially at the end when, after reading her confession, he, so finally and thoroughly re-cognized by and through her, fails to produce her as but a scattered and unclear memory similar to stones flickering and shimmering shapelessly in a stream. This memory falls short of yielding even a shadow, it merely replicates plural shadows streaming back and forth, shadows not likely to produce an image. His senses remembered, says Zweig, but his self did not.⁸

This way the end of Zweig's novella addresses some of the fundamental questions of narratology, before all the role of the spectral in the very formation of narrative voice. This question is far from irrelevant when it comes to reading Cavell, his *Philosophical Passages* for instance (echoing loudly where they invoke various Benjamin's gates and passages), when Cavell says: «How is it that having voice or signature is bearable, a voice that always escapes us, or is stolen?; and, What is the nature of the force that allows language not only to mean and to state but to perform and to suffer?; these begin to sound like questions of opera » [1995: 65].⁹

Forgetting birthdays

These vocal ghosts now cannot but carry me back to what I first said, not least because returns of this kind technologize melancholia and are a *sinthome* of writing, where this writing, to Cavell, is letter. And where it is *Brief*: it is a cipher of its origin in another language, which shimmers in Cavell like a specter, most

words, R. is N where *Romanschriftsteller* operates as N+1. (By the same measure perhaps as novella, generically, could be described as a spectral supplement at the phantom origin of the novel. As generically, the issue of the spectral supplement at the origin of the novel as genre, especially when it comes to narration, conjures forth various ghosts from Benjamin's *Illuminations*, specifically the fragments v and xi.) This spectral supplement and spectral reducibility disappear in translation where the novel (*Roman*) of R. the *Romanschriftsteller* is lost.

⁸ In Zweig: "Schatten strömten zu and fort, aber es wurde kein Bild. Er fühlte Errinerungen des Gefühls und erinnerte sich doch nicht" [1970: 163]. Whatever emerges as the subject or agency of shadows (in translation) shows here as an "es" in what is pre-original about images, as its khora beyond the agency of subjects. Just as the recall of the senses signals the conceptual limit of the frame within which R. the *Romanschriftsteller* recalls his *self*.

⁹ In an essay about Benjamin these vocal specters emerge in Cavell as "signals" and "affinities." Symptomatically, their intervention into analysis overlaps with the labor of melancholia and of moving pictures. See Cavell 1999.





visibly perhaps where the speaker of that language, Max Ophüls (the one who translates this *Brief* into the letter of the Hollywood cinema) emerges as Ophuls, without diacritics. It is here, where in Cavell's Ophuls there emerges this spectral supplement of the cipher itself (and vice versa), that a passage opens for other specters, including the ones in *Brief*: because *brief* in English denotes both what is fleeting and momentary, and command or instruction. I could almost say that *brief* in Cavell opens as a passage to the spectral hermeneutic futurity of instruction, where, from within this futurity, the very grounds for some subsequent chronology are forming. Perhaps I can say this because Cavell himself briefs his reader that way, when he describes English as his language but not that of his father, specifically because father is defined, conceptually, as an agent of instruction towards a future in which fathers can emerge only as ghosts comparable to Ophüls's diacritic.¹⁰

This is where I would like to pass through to another question: how does the end of Zweig's novella process phantoms as deconstructing agents (or angels) of chronology and inheritance?¹¹ I guess I cannot but be passing through this way as I am lingering still where my writing has begun – where I promised to reach towards (if not reach) Cavell – even though Cavell seems to emerge here as a gloss on what remains unknown in *Brief einer Unbekannten*. By the same measure, I am passing this way because I cannot but acknowledge inheriting the ghosts of my writing (and, by the same measure, the ghosts of inheritance as such) from or out of Jacques Derrida, in that very position where Cavell inherits the language of his philosophy from J.L. Austin – the position in fact where Cavell, in *Philosophical Passages*, shows Derrida as passing to or through to Austin just as Zweig's R. is making passes at *die Unbekannte*.

¹⁰ Cavell says that his father invented his birthday when he came to America; also, in his American community, he was famous for his Yiddish story-telling: "If he invented this tale of the date of his birth, that is as interesting in its way as if it actually happened. I knew the story as early as I knew that he and his siblings did not know the exact dates, even years, of their births. I hang on to this talent of his for improvisation as an antidote to the causes I have had for hating him. I do not mean only that I use it to remember that I also care about him and grieve for him. I mean that to destroy the value of that talent in my eyes would be to destroy something I treasure as a plausible inheritance from him. I mean also that it reminds me of the causes he had for hating me, for example, that my English was unaccented. Is that really a credible cause of hatred? Consider that it meant that my future, unlike his, was open. Of course exactly this difference was also something he wanted" [2006: 775].

¹¹ A processing implicit in narratology in fact, if narratology is to make *sense* of the spectral in the formation of narrative voice.





In *Passages*, Cavell says that Derrida has failed to read through Austin, having read only *How To Do Things With Words*. Derrida thus remains oblivious of Austin's earlier theory of excuses, or the very site where speech act theory is conceived. One could say therefore that Derrida forgets the birth of Austin's philosophy of language where Austin's speech act theory is the originating position of what he himself is saying. Or, to go back to Zweig's novella, one could say that Derrida forgets his birthday there where Austin remembers it as the conception of his own philosophy.

Now that I am comparing Cavell's Derrida to Zweig's R., this oblivion seems to correspond to R.'s systemic forgetting of the felicitous contingencies that bring him together with *die Unbekannte*, whom too he then forgets, perhaps only to reaffirm the systemic value of felicity. As for *die Unbekannte*, these felicitous contingencies constitute in turn the time of her rebirth as woman, perhaps only to reaffirm her, thus repeatedly reborn, as the technology of the revolution itself. Cavell quotes from Derrida saying that Austin substitutes "at times the value of force... for the value of truth." According to Cavell, however, Austin's philosophy of language is born out of Austin's labor to reaffirm the value of truth, not by substituting truth with force, but with felicity – force here would be a substitute for meaning, not for truth. By mispositioning force, Derrida misses in Austin both felicity and infelicity, because he sees them as a founding miss of language, as in part out of its reach, and not as a potentiality of language. In Derrida's view, this is the position that Austin misses; consequently, Derrida's Austin rejects, defers or excludes a "general theory [that would interrogate] as essential predicate... the value of risk or exposure [of language] to infelicity." This, however, says Cavell, is the position that Derrida himself misses, because Austin analyzes this very infelicity in his earlier essay on excuses.¹² As consequently, it is here, in the analysis of missing and infelicity, that Cavell traces a position from which to read Austin's philosophy of language as a critical theory of tragedy, because excuses in Austin's view signal "the incessant, unending vulnerability of human action" [1995: 53]. I see this as an intimation of Cavell's own interest in the melodrama of the unknown woman, where melodrama itself is intimated as the incessant, unending contingency of missing and infelicity.¹³ Also, as contingently, this

¹² See Cavell 1995: 50-52.

¹³ If Austin's speech-acts thus entail a critical theory of tragedy, this passage in Cavell paves way also to a comparative analysis of Cavell's study of melodrama (where the *Hollywood* melodrama of the unknown woman stages in fact an infelicitous *pursuit of happiness*, and therefore the failure haunting the political project of America itself), and of Jean-Pierre Vernant's study of tragedy, where Vernant analyzes tragedy as the genre formative to Greek polis, or else as the genre preeminently *political*.





entire passage to Derrida and Austin opens with Cavell saying that he is trying to finish “a small book” whose “considerations should lead to a sense of the male philosophical voice repressing the female voice in itself” [1995: 42].¹⁴

If Derrida passes to or through to Austin the way Zweig’s R. makes passes at *die Unbekannte*, Cavell passes to or through to Austin the way *die Unbekannte* makes passes at R. Cavell says that he gets born in Austin as a philosopher, because he experienced Austin’s lectures as a chance to pose a question “whether I could speak philosophically and mean every word I said” [1995: 43]. One could say therefore that Cavell is born as a philosopher when he identifies himself in Austin there where the language of philosophy is born as an iterative unforgetting of the philosophy of language, even though this iterative unforgetting is a constant threat to philosophy – there where philosophy works as a promise of the future. Or: Cavell is born as a philosopher there where this unforgetting threatens to reduce philosophy to melancholia.

This threat, or reduction, or betrayal emerges as a *sinthome* in the very genitive where language and philosophy meet as the language of philosophy and the philosophy of language: the genitive itself surfaces here as a phantom position where chronology and inheritance, implicit in the case of genitive, are reduced to a scandalous betrayal of the promise of the future. It is therefore only logical that Derrida’s pass at Austin (a pass I have compared to R.’s passes at *die Unbekannte*, and Cavell has almost compared to Don Giovanni)¹⁵ is in Cavell juxtaposed to Euripides’s *Hippolytus*. Hippolytus, says Cavell, is where Austin’s philosophy faces the question of forgetting and inheritance; also, it is here, I should add, that Austin forgets like Zweig’s R. and where Cavell remembers Austin like *die Unbekannte*. Austin quotes the *Hippolytus* as an instance of flawed promising, when Hippolytus says, “My tongue swore to, but my heart did not” [1995: 62]. One could say I guess that Hippolytus labors in Austin the way Don Juan labors in Felman’s Austin, both figures in which theory pre-supposes questions of forgetting and of inheritance. This Hippolytus, however, is himself forgotten, says Cavell, because Austin remembers him from Plato (the way Plato quotes from the *Hippolytus* in the *Symposium*), and not from Euripides. Plato’s Socrates,

¹⁴ Of course, “contingency” implies here the scope of felicity: implies in fact that position in the language of analysis that misses, and must miss, the infelicity formative to melancholia and melodrama.

¹⁵ In his foreword to the new edition of Shoshana Felman’s *The Scandal of the Speaking Body* Cavell suggests that Austin is not “like Don Juan” – a phrase Felman uses repeatedly to analyze Austin. Rather, Don Juan might be Austin’s nemesis, “a figure for the chaos awaiting a social order forgetful of Austin’s monitions” [2002: xiii]. Felman in turn suggests that Cavell’s philosophy is as seductive as Austin and Don Juan [2002: x].





that is, takes Hippolytus's voice (conjures him perhaps as he would conjure a ghost?) when he wants to excuse himself from speech.¹⁶ What Austin forgets when he remembers Plato is Euripides, whose Hippolytus speaks about heartless pledges in order to say that his words bind him regardless, that he is abandoned to them, that his tragedy (his identity therefore) is all about this binding and abandonment.¹⁷ In other words, the foundational trauma of Austin's philosophy is his forgetting that Hippolytus's pledge originates in Euripides. Which in turn is where I should add (again where the turn itself entails a scandal of chronology and inheritance) that this trauma or scandal of Austin's philosophy corresponds to the foundational trauma or scandal of the Hippolytus story. Because the figure of Hippolytus, originating from within a split between Phaedra's/stepmother's adultery (or what amounts to violated marriage vows) and Theseus's/father's misgivings, amounts itself to forgetting origins.¹⁸

When he remembers Euripides's Hippolytus as Austin's birthplace, there where Austin himself has forgotten it, Cavell takes the position of *die Unbekannte*. As this very memory cannot but keep disturbing the genitive relation between language and philosophy, Cavell as philosopher cannot but keep remembering and being born, perhaps until he is entirely reduced to iterating how what is articulated as the pledge of the future, in philosophy,¹⁹ is void or violated – until he is reduced to melancholia. The words with which he concludes his passage to Derrida and Austin seem to conjure the voice of *die Unbekannte*: "Say then that the price of having once spoken, or remarked, taken something as remarkable (worth noting, yours to note, about which to make an ado), is to have spoken forever, to have entered the arena of the inexcusable, to have taken on the responsibility for speaking further, the unending responsibility of responsiveness, of answerability, to make yourself intelligible. It is in recognizing *this* abandonment to my words, as to unfeasible epitaphs, presaging the leave-taking of death, that I *know* my voice, *recognize* my words (no different from yours) as mine" [1995: 65].

¹⁶ Again, in the mother tongue that I am here forgetting, excuse (*isprika*) is always, or first, an excuse from speech, literally an out-of-speech.

¹⁷ Cavell seems to anticipate here the very potentiality of Felman's Don Juan, and with that of Austin as inherited in deconstruction: of Austin as described by Judith Butler for instance when she says that "Felman does not take Austin to be a sovereign subject, precisely because she takes him at his word" [2002: 121].

¹⁸ Symptomatically enough, when I was first writing this in what I am now trying to forget as my mother tongue, this correspondence was initiated by what Croatian remembers as the joint linguistic origin of adultery, disbelief and the violation of promise: *nevjera*, *nevjerica*, *iznevjerica*.

¹⁹ Cavell's notion of moral perfectionism, that is, also his debt to R. W. Emerson.





Unforgetting film

This abandonment to one's words, where they are unfeasible epitaphs, presaging the leave-taking of death, brings Cavell back, once again, to the position of Zweig's unknown woman: a position haunting Austin perhaps as "distant music."²⁰ *Die Unbekannte* and her inability to forget R. anticipate in turn the very movement of Cavell's unforgetting, where the abandonment to words emerges (as a *sinthome*, again) as Cavell's fascination with moving pictures. When she talks about the way she remembers R., *die Unbekannte* describes him repeatedly as a moving image and a figure of an encompassing, irresistible gaze. Inside her story, in other words, *die Unbekannte* watches, before all as it were; her reaction to R. corresponds to the reaction of a female cinema goer who falls in love with the art of moving pictures. As irresistibly, her fascination corresponds to Cavell's fascination with the Hollywood melodrama of the unknown woman, there where film is the birthsite of philosophy, again just as R. is the birthsite of the unknown woman. I cannot but iterate: "The creation of film," says Cavell, "was as if meant for philosophy – meant to reorient everything philosophy has said about reality and its representation, about art and imitation, about greatness and conventionality, about judgment and pleasure, about skepticism and transcendence, about language and expression" [1996: vii, xii]. And if film is as if meant to reorient *everything* philosophy has said (about reality and its representation), then film is philosophy's technology, en route to the very khora where both language and image originate.

That way *die Unbekannte* in Ophüls emerges again like a phantom of the past which, deconstructing focalization, claims the specterly present tense of the technology of moving pictures en route to the khora where specters, perfects, presents and futures are created.

I am saying this not only because melodrama as a genre requires specters, as narrative figures, to *work* insofar as they *paralyze* a working-through of the past, or perhaps insofar as they paralyze the past itself within the act of working-through. Moreover, I could almost say that melodrama *works* only provisionally, in the relation it projects towards melancholia, as a narrative flutter against a systemic narrative paralysis of a melancholic (woman) – now that I am writing about melodrama and melancholia in Cavell.

As a figure that film is reaching for and taking, ever again, in *Contesting Tears* this woman is also a symptom of what film cannot grasp or take; she is therefore a specter of and to the cinematic itself, an image that film cannot work through, a

²⁰ Cavell anticipates this position when he describes Austin's perlocution as a form of magic, as «unheard and irresistible music» [2002: xix].





picture doing to film what film, as the art of moving pictures, does to philosophy. I like what this taking does to my rhetoric: in the mother tongue that I am here forgetting "paralyzed" translates also as "taken." Almost as if I cannot afford to forget that, if film succeeded in taking this woman, if the woman were taken this way, this paralyzed specter would signal the potential for paralysis of the very technology that pre-supposes the production of spectrality and movement. Taking this woman ever again, however, film (or, here, melodrama) stutters like minor literature in the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze: this stutter is "a repetition, a bifurcation, a deviation," "a trembling that is no longer psychological but linguistic" and that "pushes language to its limit" [1998: 55].²¹

This iterative taking (these iterative takes?) comes out as a symptom as early as the title of Cavell's book which takes film as a subject of philosophical analysis, or perhaps as philosophy's prosthesis: *Contesting Tears*. "Contesting" in *Contesting Tears* is both an adjective and a verb of contestation, so that its tears both contest and are being contested; in other words, the tears con-test the process of contesting. Their technology corresponds to the technology of alliteration, the technology of their very production in language, as *con-tes-ting tears*, or else to the kind of stuttering that con-tests the analysis formative to major regimes such as philosophy. Simultaneously again, this precisely is the effect of tears in melodrama: the unknown woman secretes tears while provoking the same kind of secretion in the (female) spectators: the cinematic unknown woman is no longer visible when she herself cannot see clearly, although her tears are the very moment that film wants to take as the moment of its own self-cognition.

Woman in Cavell's philosophy is therefore always also a figure of melancholia where melancholia is a foundational trauma of both film and psychoanalysis; or else, woman in Cavell's philosophy is a figure of melancholia where melancholia is a foundational trauma of film and psychoanalysis to the extent to which discourses of film and psychoanalysis are symptoms of melancholia in the language of philosophy.

The narrative labor of melodrama emerges therefore in my own writing (a ghost perhaps in its own right) when I *say* that I *could almost say*. When I say that, I care less for the specterly potentiality implicit in saying that I could say than for the fact that the same potentiality emerges in "almost," even more disturbingly than in the subjunctive. It emerges where "almost" forgets its linguistic past

²¹ It is certainly symptomatic that the above quotation from Deleuze comes from his essay on masochism, calling in turn for a comparative analysis of masochism and melancholia, also of masochism and melancholia in Freud. Such analysis would then provide a platform for a critical reading of Deleuze's own positions, specifically as his philosophy too, like Cavell's, forms around an interest in film and psychoanalysis.





just as I am forgetting my mother tongue: where “almost” always also harbors finality in deriving from “all” and “most.”²² My voice therefore cannot but yield to that position, and wants to yield to it. Not, or not only because I labor here as a spectator of Hollywood melodramas and a reader of Zweig and Cavell, so that my voice, while I am writing this, cannot but reproduce, structurally, this stuttering – this conceptual alliteration that I like. And not, or not only because I watch and speak as a woman, so that I cannot but trace a relation to the concept of woman as it works for Cavell’s vision of film, psychoanalysis and philosophy, precisely as a relation of con-testation, so that my entire position, if I want it that way, is reducible to the alliteration I like, to the vacant conceptual stretch between “not” and “not only.” And it is here that I cannot but (want to) answer the systemic question of psychoanalysis, precisely where psychoanalysis opens as a potentiality of philosophy: what does a woman want? If I were to play with Cavell’s own answer to this question, when he speaks about his mother where she labors as a figure of melancholia,²³ I would say that a woman wants *what: that she wants a position from which to shift, continually, the questions of identity towards the questions of technology.*

Of course, this gloss itself is merely a ghost of my text on Cavell, to come – a *sinthome* perhaps where it touches on technology. Perhaps it should remain a gloss, for now, to remind me of perils implicit in uncontesting – to remind me I have and can have no time for what is presumptuously final about perfection.

²² Conveniently enough, my mother tongue is here a site of unforgetting, insofar as “almost” translates as *gotovo*, and *gotovo* in Croatian denotes both “almost” and “finished.”

²³ Specifically in 1996: 221-222.





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PISMO NEPOZNATE ŽENE I MELANKOLIJA FILOZOFIJE: CAVELL, AUSTIN, DERRIDA

U svome tekstu analiziram djelokrug melankolije i melodrame u filozofiji Stanleyja Cavella, kao *sinthome* onoga što filozofija teži ustrojiti kao memoriju. Ta se analiza oslanja na novelu *Pismo nepoznate žene* Stefana Zweiga, koju Cavell u knjizi *Sporne suze* izrijeком isključuje iz vlastite analize toga problema, premda cijelu studiju osovljava oko istoimenog filma Maxa Ophülsa, snimljenoga prema Zweigu. Uzimajući to isključenje kao pretpostavku za diskusiju o Cavellovu tretmanu rodnoga mjesta i porijekla, prije svega u Austinu ali i u Derridi (u *Filozofskim pasažima*), ovdje predlažem dekonstrukciju one pozicije u recentnoj filozofiji gdje naslijeđe i memorija, čak i kad se pozivaju na problem tehnike, još računaju sa spregom politike i identiteta.

Ključne riječi: melankolija, melodrama, glas, obećanje, film, filozofija, psihoanaliza

Key words: melancholia, melodrama, voice, promise, film, philosophy, psychoanalysis

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